RACS investigates complaint on exam policy breach

Thursday 5 May 2016

The Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS) is investigating a recording that alleges serious concerns about its examination process and policies.

RACS has referred a complaint about this issue to a Complaints Committee, consistent with College policy and will follow the established complaints process. Under the policy, a committee is established to deal with complaints involving such allegations.

RACS recently learned that in May 2013, a secret, illegal recording was made of one segment of the College Fellowship examination in one of the nine specialties. The recording has since been substantially edited and re-worked to suggest that RACS policies and procedures were not followed by the examiners, and that their assessments were not impartial.

RACS has identified the candidates who went through this examination section in May 2013 and confirmed they have all since passed the examination and are Fellows of the College.

RACS is now investigating whether, in 2013, there was a breach of agreed College examination procedures and whether the material on the tape reflects, or misrepresents, the actual candidate assessment.

If the recording accurately reflects the examination in May 2013, the assessment was in breach of agreed policies and procedures. In this case, the College will act to maintain the integrity of the exam process.

While RACS investigates these allegations, the examiners concerned are not available to participate in examination activities. Since becoming aware of this issue, the College has strengthened the examination process to protect its integrity, including by appointing additional observers and increasing examiner training.

This investigation is ongoing, and involves specialist, independent analysis of the tape and related information. The results of this analysis will be provided to the RACS Complaints Committee, to inform its consideration.

To protect the integrity of the complaints investigation process, RACS will not comment further at this time.

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Background

RACS provides surgical education programs to nine surgical specialties across Australia and New Zealand. These programs are comprehensive over many years and involve ongoing work-based assessments and formal examinations. Many trainees need to repeat components of the training or assessments before they can demonstrate they meet the required standards and progress through the program.

The Fellowship examination is a critical part of the assessment. It is a multi-day, seven-section examination. Typically, only 75% of applicants will pass at any one examination attempt. Trainees and International Medical Graduates can repeat the Fellowship examination a number of times. Their assessment must be impartial, fair and just at all times.

Candidates must pass both workplace-based assessments and this certifying examination before being awarded a FRACS and becoming a Fellow of the College. The exam is also used extensively to assess surgeons, who are International Medical Graduates and wish to establish themselves as specialist surgeons in Australia or New Zealand.

The examination process has been in place for many years and continues to be reviewed and revised to ensure that it meets modern educational and assessment practices. RACS examiners are formally trained in assessment techniques and examination protocols, including the need for impartiality.

About RACS

RACS is the leading advocate for surgical standards, professionalism and surgical education in Australia and New Zealand. The College is a not-for-profit organisation that represents more than 7000 surgeons and 1300 surgical trainees and International Medical Graduates. RACS also supports healthcare and surgical education in the Asia-Pacific region and is a substantial funder of surgical research. There are nine surgical specialties in Australasia being: Cardiothoracic surgery, General surgery, Neurosurgery, Orthopaedic surgery, Otolaryngology Head-and-Neck surgery, Paediatric surgery, Plastic and Reconstructive surgery, Urology and Vascular surgery.

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